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### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **‘ Nagas’ : The Religious Pantheon of Ancient India**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This article mainly reflects the emergence and development of the Naga cult in India. The article mainly discusses around the early development of the Naga worship in ancient India and how it developed into one of the most popular regional cult of Northern India and with times how it expanded. The article is mainly based on the exiting literary sources including Vedas, Puranas and various chronicles and the archaeological remains that have been gathered through vigorous excavations in the various sites, basically in North India. This work also, however, discusses about the hidden intensions behind the emergence of this religious pantheon during the ancient Indian period.

**KEYWORDS:** Nagas, Mathura, Kashmir, Taksaka, Ananta, Mahabharata, Ravana.

### **1. INTRODUCTION:**

Nagas, the snake-worshipping communities of ancient India occupy an important place in Indian history. The cult of snake worship assumed a special significance and importance in India as in no other part of the world. This unique cult got widely distributed or developed in various forms. However, it is interesting to admit here that in Hindu Pantheon the symbolism of Nagas is much more compound. If we look closely into the Hindu Religious rituals and spiritual tradition, a snake is not an evil creature but a divine figure which represents eternalness as well as actuality. It actually represents the process of existence consisting of creation, which develops into preservation and then the ultimate demolition and lastly to extinction.

We can find references to snake deities in both Hindu folklore and literature. They are popularly associated with both Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva and several other divine figures including Indra, who is usually believed to ride an elephant known as Nagendra, the Lord of the snakes, which most probably shows the control over the snake world.

### **2. POPULAR NAGAS:**

The Nagas can be seen as some kind of community in India from the time of the Later Vedic period. The Nagas enjoy a prominent place in ancient Indian mythology and folklore. There are literary references to numerous Nagas. The most famous Nagas which acquire important place in Indian literature are Sesa or Ananta, Vasuki, Taksaka, Sankha, Mani and others. The cult of Nagas, along with another class of semi-angelic beings known as Yakshas, was widely prevalent in ancient India. The worship of snake deities is popular in different parts of India even to this day. Manasa Devi, the serpant goddess is popular among the people of North-east India basically in Assam who is very vigorously worshipped by the people of lower part of Assam especially.

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### **3. VARIOUS POPULAR WRITINGS ON NAGAS:**

Vedic texts very frequently use the word 'Ahi' which actually stands for 'snake'. The word 'Ahi' in *rityl* reflects the fear for the snakes. Apart from this the word also stands for reflecting the uncommon features of snakes and for the admiration of the snakes. Among the Vedas, Rig Veda mentions that the Nagas became a community of regular deities who were used to be worshipped on a daily basis during the time of the Yajurvedic society. Rig Veda also refers to the various offerings that were made to the Naga deities during this period's various religious rituals and practices. Atharvaveda talks about various prayers dedicated to the Nagas which were actually chanted to get rid of the destructive attitude of the snake deities. This Veda further refers that the snakes are nothing but the saviours of the people or of the communities. According to these writings, snakes are capable of destructing the harmony of the world or of the extinction of humanity due to which we may consider, at certain points, the fact that might be Naga cult emerged and grew subsequently out of the fear in human hearts for their destruction by snake deities.

If we look at the ancient time period of Indian history then we can notice that the worship of Nagas was quiet popular in Northern Indian region. For example, various available chronicles of Kashmir speak vigorously about the worship of a quality amount of Naga deities in that region. The most popular Naga deity of that region as reflected in the writings is Nila who was regarded as the guardian deity of Kashmir and believed to had lived in the water. An acclaimed 8<sup>th</sup> century's royal house of ancient Kashmir represented by Muktapida Laliditya interestingly professed that they were the ancestors of Naga Karkotaka, who is also famous in the episode of Nala of Mahabharata. Some old Brahmi inscriptions from Bharhut mention about two Naga kings, namely, Elapatra and Cakravaka. If we go through the Buddhist literature then it can be seen that these writings have mentioned about Naga Elapatra as the popular Naga of Takshasila, where the great serpent-sacrifice of the Kuru king Janamejaya is believed to have taken place to take revenge from Naga Taksaka for his father, king Parikshit's death.

One of the most famous of the Naga deities in ancient Indian literature is Taksaka. He seems to be mentioned in the Atharvaveda and Sankhayana Grhyasutras. The Visnumriti and others prescribe food offering, for the protection of the house, to various deities including Taksaka. Taksaka is the chief Naga hero in the Mahabharata stories about the Kuru Kings, Parikshit and his son Janamejaya. There are several references in the epic Ramayana to Ravana's victory over the Naga king Vasuki and his conquest of the Naga capital Bhogavati.

Prevalence of Taksaka cult is also referred to in the Kalhana's Rajatarangini and Bilhana's Vikramankadevacarita. If we look for the prevalence of Taksaka cult in modern times, we can notice the shrine dedicated to him near Navali in the old Indore state only which is currently in Madhya Pradesh.

### **4. AVAILABLE NAGA INSCRIPTIONS AND IMAGES:**

Countless ancient Naga images have been discovered at the various regions of Mathura and its other adjoining areas around Mathura. An inscription of the Kanishka Era corresponding to A.D. 104 bears the event of the installation of a stone at the place of Bhagavat Dadhikarna, the Lord of the Nagas. Another Mathura inscription on a Naga image dated in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of Kanishka's reign records the consecration of a tank and a garden dedicated to Bhagavat Bhuminaga. A Naga image discovered at Chhargaoon, five miles away from the southern part of Mathura, also bears an inscription stating that the Naga was installed by two persons in their own tank. But no name is applied to the Naga in this case. The popularity of the Naga cult in the Mathura region is again indicated by the Harivamsa episode of the famous Kaliya-Naga, who lived in the waters of the Yamuna as well as by the well-known conception of Balarama as the incarnation of Ananta-Naga.

A great Centre of Naga cult in the Eastern part of Northern India was Rajagriha (Modern Rajgir in Patna, Bihar), the ancient capital of Magadha, and its neighbourhood. A writing recorded by Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang shows that Nalanda was the prominent Naga and the guardian deity of the city of Nalanda. According to Mahabharata, there were temples of the Naga gods, Swastika-Naga and Mani-Naga at Rajagriha. Ancient Naga images have been discovered at Rajgir or Rajagriha. A sculpture discovered in the ruins of Maniyar Math, is known to bear the representation of two male Naga figures with a very tiny female figure between the two male figures. These three figures have been identified as Mani-Naga, Swastika-Naga and Sumagadha respectively. Sumagadha has been referred to as the sister of the two Naga brothers as inscribed on the sculpture itself. Regarding this image of the female snake-deity, it is however interesting to reflect here that the worship of the Naginis does not appear to have been popular in other parts of India during ancient times. Although Naginis are referred in some of the Puranic episodes and also in the Epics, the Nagas are always seem to have been the most prominent figures as reflected in the ancient Indian literature. In Bengal and its neighbourhood people are sometimes found worshipping the Vastu-Sarpa, which is a serpent that lies in a particular house for a long time as a household deity as believed to do no harm to the householders.

## **5. REASONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NAGA CULT:**

The origin and gradual expansion of this creed however create some mysterious questions among the scholars as why did this creed connected with the worship of Nagas became so popular within a short span of time. But with the development of human psychology, scholars now try to argue that due to the fear of death might be Naga worship gradually developed in India. To some extent, this theory can be regarded as true. However, while the snakes are regarded as threatening on one side, they are on the other side admired by people. More interestingly, people also believe that snakes reflect immortality and purity because they change their skin on a regular basis. But, it is important to keep this in mind before considering any theory as true because there is abundance of theories regarding the emergence of the Naga worship in India.

## **6. CONCLUSION:**

However, it is really important to understand the growth and expansion of this creed in India during the ancient period. Many questions can be raised as why this creed got so much importance and popularity among the people. Some initial answers regarding the emergence of this pantheon can be put forward. For example, might be this religion arose as gratitude towards the snakes that were always connected with the mainstream deities. Besides, the fear of death by the snakes might have brought the communities to worship the Nagas as deities. Therefore, a close analysis is needed to know about the development of this pantheon in India.

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